

# Magnetic attraction

There's nothing new about the idea of an MG saloon. Back in the 1950s, the ZA/ZB Magnettes offered sleek, stylish and sporting motoring. Today, they still give you all that, plus superb value for money. We show you how to make the right choice

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The ZA and ZB Magnettes are unusual in being liked and highly respected by press and public alike, both when new and ever since! Their overall suitability and competence as sporting saloons is particularly praiseworthy, for they date from an era when the performance and dynamic capabilities of most family cars were, generally, relatively unexciting.

The Z-series cars were notable in many respects. For a start, they were the fastest 1.5-litre British saloons in production in the mid-1950s. They were also the first MGs to feature unitary construction, and the first to use BMC's new four-cylinder 'B' series engine in twin carburettor form (it also powered the Austin A50 Cambridge, from 1954, and the Morris Oxford; in both cases with a single carburettor). The willing new power unit was significant in that, in contrast with its contemporary, the ZA, and especially the more powerful ZB, were lively performers, both from a standing start and on the move. They also possessed excellent low-speed flexibility, making the cars as easy to drive in town as on the open road; a minimum amount of gear changing was required in everyday motoring. Importantly, the Magnettes also featured precise rack-and-pinion steering and independent front suspension. The result was predictable, safe yet sporting road holding and handling characteristics, plus excellent ride comfort.

Even today, the cars' eager performance and praiseworthy dynamic characteristics are immediately obvious to anyone taking the wheel of a ZA or ZB for the first time. Indeed, it is hard to believe that these models were introduced the best part of 50 years ago. At that time, of course, they were considered to be very much state-of-the-art. It is worth noting that the final drive gearing of the

ZA is rather lower than that of the ZB, and this translates into high engine revs at motorway speeds. For many potential buyers this may not matter, but it could become an issue for those intending to use a Magnette frequently for long-distance travel. Also, bear in mind that a few cars were fitted with contemporary Laycock overdrive conversions; useful for high-speed work in lowering engine revs. A modern alternative is to install a five-speed gearbox kit, such as those supplied by Hi-Gear Engineering Ltd (tel/fax: 01332 514503) and featured in *MG World* February/March 2000.

The sleek, Gerald Palmer-designed bodywork is, at first glance, very similar to that of the Wolseley 4/44, which was introduced a year previously. However, although the bodyshell was shared between the two cars, there were many differences. In fact only the shell itself, the front doors and the boot lid are fully interchangeable (in fact, the rear number plate and its method of illumination differ between the models, too). Furthermore, the Wolseley 4/44 was much slower, being powered by a single carburettor, 1250cc XPAG motor, developing 46bhp (the same basic unit was also used in the MG T series sports cars and the Y-type saloons, by the way).

Interior appointments in the Magnettes were to a high standard, with a wood fascia (apart from the early ZA models with their 'tin top' dash), leather-trimmed seats and sumptuous carpets. Open the door on a well-kept ZA or ZB and you will be greeted with the typical and unmistakable sight, feel and smell of a well-made classic British car interior. Driver information is most impressive, too, with supplementary instruments including an ammeter, oil pressure gauge and coolant temperature. Only a rev counter is missing! Incidentally, the seats are

comfortable for all occupants, and even those in the back have plenty of leg- and headroom. Boot space is not over-generous, however, because the sloping tail of the car restricts available height, but the bumper level opening makes loading easy.

## What to look for

### Body and Interior

The dream of owning a ZA or ZB can soon become a nightmare unless you buy with extreme care. Like most vehicles of their time, the cars have a number of areas which are prone to disintegration due to rust, and the problems are often compounded by bodged repairs carried out over many years. In some cases, Magnettes have been glossed-up to make them look like 'Condition One' vehicles (with, of course, a price tag to match), whereas in reality, beneath the shiny paintwork there is a multitude of horrors waiting to come to light.

The Magnette bodyshell is vulnerable to disintegration in a number of key areas, which should be checked early in your inspection of the vehicle. Bear in mind that major structural repairs are going to be time-consuming and expensive – especially if you have to pay someone else to tackle the work.

Although complete, original BMC body panels are virtually extinct, repair sections are available to tackle all the rot-prone areas around the cars. Most other spares required to keep the cars running are also readily sourced from specialists. However, difficult items to source currently include the 'MG' emblem for the steering wheel, and the temperature gauge transmitter unit. Due to a shortage of

components, it is also near impossible to have speedometer heads rebuilt at the moment.



Don't overlook the state of the interior; it's worth finding one that is sound and original. If the leather trim and dashboard woodwork, for instance, are in sad condition, you could be looking at well in excess of £1,000 to buy the materials alone for restoration.

## Rear Wings, Springs and Floor Pans

Rear wings can become weak along their lower edges. These sections were originally double-skinned, so check that they still are!



The rear wheel arch lips, also double-skinned, are often sadly lacking in substance.



The floorpans need to be inspected from above and below, and you should take particular note of the condition of the structure around the crossmembers underneath and behind the front seats, and the steelwork adjacent to the toeboards and inner sills. The heelboard at the front are double-skinned and can rust too, so check them carefully as well.



The structures surrounding the supports at the forward ends of the rear springs are positioned between the chassis runners and the rear ends of each sill. If these areas are in a weakened state, repairs are going to be complex. For a start, the front wings doors inner and outer sills need to be removed; not a job for the faint-hearted.

If the inner and outer sills are seriously rusted, the chances are that the inner membranes – situated between the inner and outer panels – are corroded as well. Remanufactured outer sill panels are available, but replacement is not easy, and involves removing the front wings. The inner sills, on the other hand, are relatively straightforward to make from scratch.

## Doors

Door bottoms rust badly and should be checked carefully for signs of filler.



Note that the front doors can be swapped between the MG Magnette and the Wolseley 4/44 bodyshells, although the doors were drilled to suit each individual model. Similarly, the boot lids can be swapped, but if fitting a Wolseley item to an MG, the screw holes for the 4/44's number plate/lamp assembly will need to be filled in.

## Front Wings, (and Other Things)

Check inboard of the lower rear corner of the front wing. Tubes drain condensation from the windscreen into the hollow compartments hidden by the base of the wing. There should be a gap between the upper edge of the sill and the lower section of the wing. In theory, water escapes through this aperture. In practice, though, rust is common in this area; and often the front ends of the sills, the lower rear corners of the wings, the splash panels and the bulkheads are in poor condition. Some owners have filled the gaps between the wings and the sills, so then there is no way out for the water to escape!



Front wings are especially vulnerable to rust around the headlamps and in their lower corners.



Open the bonnet (and boot) and check the corners and frame for corrosion.



The rubber windscreen drain tubes, as well as the larger diameter air intake box drain tubes (which normally empty onto the road), can perish, and the steel portions of both types can rust. This results in leaking into the interior. Lift the lid on the scuttle and squint inside to assess the condition. To avoid such problems in the future it pays to check regularly that these tubes (and the area around the air vent) are unobstructed. Keeping the scuttle-mounted air vent lid open as much as possible also helps, and prevents excessive condensation from forming on the inside of the windscreen. It's not unknown, though, for the scuttle lid to have been welded/brazed/sealed in the closed position. As a result, the screen will steam up and moisture tends to collect, to cause havoc later on!

## Mechanics



The condition of the mechanical components is of far less importance than the structural state of the car, and in any case, the main mechanical units usually survive well. The 'B' series motors are tough, long-lasting sloggers, quite capable of clocking up 150,000 miles or more, provided that the oil and filter have been changed regularly.

On high mileage units, expect a little valve gear rattle, caused by wear of the rocker shaft/rocker bushes, and/or out-of-adjustment valve clearances. More serious is a distinct tapping noise, at first evident only under light throttle openings, with the engine fully warmed up. This indicates the first signs of big end/crankshaft problems. Watch too for oil pressure gauge readings of much below 45 to 50 psi at normal road speeds, after a run of several miles.

Look also for clouds of blue smoke belching from the exhaust when accelerating away after a long descent on over-run. This is a sure sign of wear in the piston rings/pistons/cylinder bores, and an early overhaul is on the cards. Fortunately, an engine rebuild is not the end of the world in terms of complexity or cost. The stripdown and re-assembly

work can be tackled easily at home, once the complete unit has been removed from the car. If ever the cylinder head needs to be removed, conversions involving the installation of hardened exhaust valves/seats to enable continuous running on unleaded fuel are readily available for the B' series engine, and prices are typically around £200. The gearboxes and rear axle assemblies are renowned for their longevity. The first signs of wear are noisy bearings, also worn synchromesh (especially noticeable when changing down into second gear –so remember to check this during your test run).

## Prices

Prices vary widely. Our advice is to look at as many examples as possible, and, if looking at a car purporting to be a beauty, to ensure that it really is as good as its description. Bear in mind that a full restoration, professionally carried out, could cost as much as £18,000.

Examples for sale recently spotted include two ZBs, condition implied as being 'excellent', for £3,950 and £4,500: a 'very original' Varitone, for £4,250 and a 'tin dash top ZA, truly in superb order', for £12,000.

**UNDER £1,500:** Unless you are very lucky, in this area you are looking at project cars. Expect to find lots of structural corrosion, body filler and grief! **£3,000 to £5,000:** Sound cars, in theory requiring just minor attention.

**£5,000 plus:** Theoretically in good condition in every respect, although many cars priced at this level are not as good as they appear at first. Bear in mind that a real concours contender may well cost in excess of £12,000.

## Owner's View

Geoff Webb, of Llandudno, North Wales, has owned and enjoyed his ZB Varitone for the past 22 years. Geoff has previously owned a similar example (for three and a half years) during the early 1960s, and he had been so impressed by its reliability (it never let him down) and performance that he was determined to acquire another. So, in 1978, he bought his current Varitone from a Rolls Royce dealer in Huddersfield, the car having originally been sold by Caffyn's of Eastbourne.



At First, when he bought his current ZB, in 1978, the car was used a great deal, although these days it does not cover a huge mileage, and in total, from new, the car has only clocked up 46,000 miles. Geoff's other MG – a B GT, is driven more frequently than the Magnette, which is nevertheless still used for car shows and car club outings – including the annual Snowdon Run in North Wales. It was also used as his son's wedding car, two years ago.

Geoff says that his ZB is still in 'factory' condition, to the extent that the original spare wheel is still in the boot, although he admits that he plans to convert to radial tyres (giving better grip) in the near future. He praises the solid build quality of the car, its

'traditional' styling and virtues, its reliability and excellent performance – it's quite happy cruising at 65 to 70 mph. Incidentally, since the demise of Four Star petrol, Geoff has been running his Varitone on unleaded fuel, treated with the Valvemaster Plus additive, with no adverse effects so far.

He confirms that Magnettes are very straightforward to work on, and says that it is easier to buy spares (from specialists) for the MG than for a modern car, although the black paint on his example has proved very difficult to match precisely. The ZB has also proved to be inexpensive to run, with the total cost of spares, repairs and maintenance amounting to less than £2,000 for the 22 years of motoring – the car has never needed any major work!

Geoff's advice to anyone thinking of buying a ZA or ZB is to go for a good example, which should then give good service as an effective, interesting and sporty family car.

## Specialists

**Anthony Blair**, Blue Slates Farm, Ellerton, York YO4 4PN; tel/fax: 01757 288344; email: [anthonybriar@hotmail.com](mailto:anthonybriar@hotmail.com)  
*Spares supplied, also mechanical and bodywork restorations.*

**MG Specialists (Lenwade; John and Lou Shorten)**, 44 The Street, Lenwade, Norwich NR9 5SD; tel/fax: 01603 872436, email: [mgspecs@hotmail.com](mailto:mgspecs@hotmail.com)  
*Spares supplied, also mechanical and bodywork restorations.*

**NTG Motor Services**, 282 – 284 Bramford Road, Ipswich IP1 4AY; tel: 01473 211240; fax: 01473 743133; email: [ntg.ltd@virgin.net](mailto:ntg.ltd@virgin.net)  
*Spares and workshop service*

## Club Scene

**MG Car Club** (incorporates Z Register), Kimber House, PO Box 251, Abingdon, Oxfordshire; tel: 01235 555552; fax: 01235 533755

**MG Owners Club**, Octagon House, Swavesey, Cambridge CB4 5QZ; tel: 01954 231125

## Looking after it

Even if the example you are viewing requires a little mechanical work, do not despair, since most routine maintenance/repair jobs can be dealt with by a competent do-it-yourself mechanic. The traditional driveline layout and inherent simplicity of the mechanical design means that the cars are relatively easy to keep on the road. The specialist suppliers are able to help with a wealth of components (many of them re-manufactured) to help Magnette owners keep on enjoying their cars.

### Drivetrain

The engine bay is spacious and there is plenty of room to get at virtually all the components requiring routine attention. Checking/re-setting the valve clearances is straightforward, using the 'Rule of Nine' (check and adjust valve number one with eight fully open, two with seven open, and so on, in each case the sum of the valve numbers being nine), and a head decoke is easy, too, with no special tools required (apart from a valve spring compressor and a torque wrench, of course).

Changing a clutch/gearbox can also be tackled at

home, with the gearbox being lowered from beneath the car in the traditional manner.

### Running gear

It is essential that all the chassis lubrication points receive attention every 1000 miles; there are up to 12 running gear grease points to deal with (two on each kingpin, two on the steering column/rack, one on each trackrod end, two on the propeller shaft and one on each handbrake cable; plus another, originally, on the water pump), but it doesn't take long to attend to them all, to ensure a very long operating life for all the components so equipped.

### Bodywork

Major bodywork restoration on an MG Magnette is certainly not to be undertaken lightly. As explained in the main text, some aspects of the bodywork construction are complex and difficult to repair properly (especially the areas inboard of the lower rear corners of the front wings, and the structures around the forward ends of the rear springs). On the other hand, though, the front wings are bolt-on panels, so in theory these are fairly easy to remove and to re-fit, to attend to damage normally hidden by the wings, or to let repair sections into the wings.

## ZA/ZB Magnette key dates

### October 1953

**Magnette ZA:** Earls Court Motor Show introduction. New Magnette shares Gerald Palmer-designed main bodyshell with Wolseley 4/44 (announced in the autumn of 1952), but exterior panel work and grilles differ, also ZA features twin carburettor, 1489cc B Series engine/drivetrain (Austin-designed, and built at Longbridge); rear axle has better location too, with torque arm linking axle and bodywork. First cars (up to Chassis No. 750) had no front quarterlight windows. Bodywork side trims follow front wheel arch profiles.

### February 1954

Modified oil pump.

### March 1955

Wood-finish dashboard replaces earlier so-called 'tin-top' type.

### July 1956

From Chassis No. 18101, higher compression engine installed (with twin 1.5in SU carburettors, modified manifolds and twinned-valve springs), producing 68.5bhp.

### October 1956

ZB introduced, with 68.5bhp engine as detailed above, and higher ratio differential. Changes include the adoption of a dished steering wheel and straight side trims. Varitone variant has wider, wrap-around rear screen, plus flashing indicators (in place of semaphores) and usually supplied with two-tone paintwork. Semi-automatic 'Manumatic' transmission option.

### December 1956

Front and rear doors have safety locks.

### October 1958

End of Manumatic option.

### December 1958

ZB discontinued.

# Datafile

	ZA	ZB
Engine	BMC 'B' Series overhead valve (pushrod) four cylinder units	
Capacity	1489cc	1489cc
Max. Power (bhp/rpm)	60/4600	68.5/5250
0 – 60 mph (sec)	22	18.5
Max speed (mph)	85	90
Fuel consumption (mpg)	25 – 33	25 – 33
Current	1953 – 56	1956 – 58
Numbers built	18,076	18,574

## Thanks ...

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